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THE PEANUT

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THE PEANUT

The peanut is more American than apple pie.

And there's a great deal to the story. Americans relate to the peanut. Like most Americans, the peanut sprang from humble roots abroad. Once scorned as "food for hogs and the poor," the peanut today finds a rightful place on the tables of the mighty as well. That's American.

Where did peanuts originally come from? Who grows them? Where are they grown? How do you grow peanuts? How do you prepare peanuts? In how many ways are peanuts used?

The peanut's origin is mysterious and somewhat obscure. According to the publication *It's Impossible to Eat Only One . . .* by Astor Perry, "scientists tell us it evolved thousands of years ago, in South America, from a plant quite similar to the one we know today. The exact area and the exact type of plant it came from is unknown. It is probable that it grew, spread, and adapted itself to other areas thousands of years before it was discovered by man."⁽⁴⁾¹

"Peru," Perry wrote, "is closely associated with the history of the peanut. Early records tell us that it was found growing along the Marañon River and was being eaten by Indians and Spaniards as early as 1550. Excavations of ancient graves have uncovered utensils filled with a peanut variety similar to the one grown in Peru today."

After peanuts were discovered by Europeans in South America in the 16th century, they were carried by traders to Africa and from there brought to North America along with slaves in colonial days. Because of this African connection, it was widely believed until quite recently that peanuts were native to Africa.⁽⁶⁾

The peanut industry developed very slowly in the United States for several reasons: Few uses for peanuts were known; they were regarded as food for only the poor slave families of the South; and peanuts were thought to have little nutritive value. According to L.C. Gray in *A History of the Southern United States*, "Prior to the Civil War, peanuts were

¹ Italicized numbers in parentheses refer to items listed under Sources at the end of this brochure.

used mainly as hog feed and hay. They were used to a slight extent for oil, but were not popular as food." (3)

During and immediately after the Civil War, the commercial production of peanuts increased rapidly. (6) But the greatest factor which contributed to the expansion of the American peanut industry was the invention around 1900 of equipment for planting, cultivating, and harvesting the nuts; for separating the nuts from the plants; and for shelling and cleaning the kernels. The mechanical sheller, especially, made possible the rapid increase in the use of peanuts and peanut products such as peanut oil, roasted and salted peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut candy and other confections.

But another element of vital importance to the development of the peanut industry in the United States was the creative research and educational work of the distinguished black American scientist, Dr. George Washington Carver.

Born in 1864 of a slave mother from whom he was separated as an infant, Dr. Carver was cared for by a foster family. (2) When Carver was 12 years old he begged a ride in a wagon as far as Fort Scott, Kansas, and there he began an 18-year struggle to graduate from high school and to secure a college education.

Turned down by Iowa State University at Ames, Dr. Carver was admitted to Methodist Simpson College in Indiana, the first black enrolled in its student body. After completing a 2-year course at Simpson, he was admitted finally to Iowa State University. He received a B.S. in agriculture in 1894 at the age of 30. Two years later he received a master of science degree. He was awarded subsequently an honorary doctorate from the university at Ames.

In 1896, Carver accepted a call from the noted black educator Booker T. Washington to become the first director of agriculture at the nationally known black school, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. At Tuskegee, Carver was a pioneer in the utilization of agricultural waste and in the development of natural resources, discovering numerous new uses for crops and developing products of industrial value. (6)

Dr. Carver took to the road with the message that the farmers had to diversify their crops and practice soil conservation. According to a long-time friend and associate, A. W. Curtis, Carver "gave to

agriculture a new outlook, to industry a new alliance, and to chemistry a new meaning."

"Dr. Carver experimented with soybeans, peanuts, sweet potatoes, clovers, corn, and many other crops," Curtis said, "but he urged farmers to grow peanuts and sweet potatoes to replace a part of the cotton acreage because they were already being grown to a limited extent and therefore would not be crops that the farmer did not know how to cultivate."

Carver realized that it was not enough just to encourage farmers to produce more sweet potatoes and peanuts. He felt he also had to work to expand the markets for the crops. Analyzing the contents of the peanut, Carver, who was sometimes called the "Peanut Wizard," found it contained fats, oils, gums, resins, sugars, starches, pectins, pentosans, and proteins. By recombining these elements, he discovered over 300 potential peanut products—flour, cereals, washing powder, drinks, sauces, salves, ink, paper oil, axle greases, cheese, soap, linoleum, rubber, and many more. Carver's peanut milk was used by the great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, and it saved countless lives in Africa.

Carver's discoveries helped the peanut crop reach a value second only to that of cotton, and the one-crop system in the South was ended.

The peanut has many names. In colonial times it was called the ground nut, as it is in Africa today and in almost all countries except the United States. It is also called the goober, or goober pea, the earth almond, and the underground kidney bean. It has even been called the monkey nut.

Despite its name, the peanut is not a nut; it is a legume. It supplies many nutrients, enriches the soil where it grows, and gives off oxygen in abundance. (1) Although it is closely related to both beans and peas, it differs widely from them because of its habit of developing pods underground. And for all its fame, the peanut is the shyest of plants. It breaks through the sandy soil and blooms. Then it turns its stems downward, back into the earth from whence it came. Underground, it grows and stays until man or animal digs it up.

Peanuts are grown throughout the world—mainly as an important oil seed crop. In the United States, peanuts are used chiefly for food. Because the peanut is so highly nutritious and because of the world's protein deficiency, the peanut's use as a worldwide food crop is expected to increase.

Peanut butter is a worthwhile source of protein,



although the protein is of lower quality than that found in meats in general. Peanut butter is also a source of several minerals and provides some useful amounts of B-vitamins.

World production of peanuts in 1976 was 41,197.4 million pounds. The largest producer was India with 12,786.7 million pounds, and the People's Republic of China was second with 6,172.9 million pounds. The United States grew 9.1 percent of the world total or 3,750.9 million pounds.

In the United States the peanut is primarily a southern crop, with seven States accounting for 98 percent of the total produced. In 1976 Georgia ranked first with 41.4 percent of the U.S. crop, followed by Alabama and Florida. In fact, peanuts are Georgia's No. 1 cash crop.

Of the U.S. peanut crop used for edible purposes in 1976, nearly 50 percent went into peanut butter, about 25 percent went for salted peanuts, candy accounted for 18 percent, and roasting 8 percent. A variety of foods made up the remainder.

Per capita consumption of peanuts in 1976 was 8.4 pounds. Americans consume approximately 4 million pounds of peanuts every day. When people say "that's peanuts" to minimize the price of something, they don't really know what they're saying. In the United States, a year's peanut crop is worth far more than our annual imports of diamonds. (1)

A physician in St. Louis seeking a nutritious, easy-to-digest food for his elderly patients reportedly was the first American to grind up peanuts and make peanut butter, although historians tell us that South American Indians apparently made a peanut paste similar to peanut butter. A favorite food of almost all Americans, peanut butter was first made commercially in 1890. It quickly became widely popular—its use increasing to the point where nearly half of the peanuts shelled in the United States go into peanut butter. Peanut butter has a loyal public. Prisoners in California went on strike a few years ago. They said everything would be okay if they could have more peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. (1)

Peanuts, given the right soil and the right climate, can be grown in home gardens. They can even be grown indoors in pots. Advice on growing peanuts usually is available from the county Extension agent in those States where they are grown as a crop. The Extension agent in most cases is listed under county government offices. Ways of

preparing peanuts and peanut recipes generally are available from Extension home economists.

Some 34 years after the death of Dr. George Washington Carver, new uses for peanuts still are being discovered. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has developed a process to produce a partially defatted peanut, which is lower in calories. A new type of peanut flake has been developed. In 1977, one company announced two new products made from peanut hulls—an artificial fire log and a type of kitty litter.

A famous anecdote about peanuts is recounted in *The Great American Peanut Book*: "Helen Hayes met her late husband, playwright Charles MacArthur, at a party where he passed her a dish of salted peanuts, with the remark, 'I wish they were emeralds.' Years later, returning from a trip abroad, MacArthur presented his wife with a little bag of emeralds and said, 'Do you know something, Helen? I sort of wish they were peanuts.'"

SOURCES

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- (5) Rienow, Robert and Leona. *From Orchids to Peanuts*, Part II. *The Rotarian*, Jan. 1965.
- (6) U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Peanut Marketing*. Mktg. Bull. No. 29, Agr. Mktg. Serv., Fruit and Veg. Div., Jan. 1964.

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